

Speech by Liz Kendall, MP for Leicester West
National Association for Hospital Education
Annual Conference
18 October 2019

INTRODUCTION

I'm absolutely delighted to be here today and honoured you've invited me to speak at your annual conference.

I want to start by making a confession.

Throughout my working life I've had two great passions

Education - and the need to give every child the best start in life, as the key to a better, fairer society.

And the NHS – working to ensure its founding principles are fulfilled for every community, in every generation, in the face of rapid demographic, technological and societal change.

But despite these passions – and working for everyone from the Department of Health, Kings Fund and NHS Confederation to the Maternity Alliance and House of Commons Education Select Committee – I had never come across, and to be honest had no idea about, the issue of hospital education until 4th November 2016 ... the day I visited Willow Bank Day School in Leicester.

As I'm sure you know, Willow Bank provides education for around 50 to 70 young people who are unable to attend their usual secondary school because of ill health.

Many of the students are supported by Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, and all of them by a consultant.

They are taught in small classes, with personalised timetables and extra curricular activities – all of which are provided in close liaison with their families, medical professionals and schools.

When the time is right, students are helped either to return to their school, attend another school where appropriate, or go on to college or employment. Whatever is best for the individual child.

The “forgotten children”

This visit opened my eyes to what some people have called the “forgotten children”: the children who experience prolonged absence from school due to physical or mental health problems, for whom the consequences can be profound.

We don't know the exact number of children in the UK that this affects, because there's no comprehensive or systematically collated data.

The Department for Education says that in 2017/18 around 360,000 children were persistently absent from school because of illness and medical appointments.

However there are likely to be gaps in this data, because of differences in how it is collected by Heads and reported by parents, and because some children are missed out entirely – for example we have no idea at all about the number of sick children being educated at home.

But what we do know is that the experience of being off school for many months due to illness can have a huge impact on children and their families.

The young person can end up spending months undergoing gruelling tests, treatment and operations. Missing out on school means they can fall behind in their studies, harming their attainment and achievement.

Significant absences from school can also have a serious emotional impact on children. Losing contact with your friends and classmates can be hugely isolating for children, often making them feel desperately lonely. On top of that, knowing you've got to catch up on all your classes can create massive pressure and stress. And if your appearance changes because of your illness, that's yet another blow to your self-confidence.

One parent at a recent event I attended described the horribly isolating impact that three years of exclusion due to Leukemia had on her son. Once a socially confident child, he now suffers from anxiety and OCD and he's lost so much confidence in relating to other children, he has panic attacks in their presence.

These immediate problems are hugely challenging, but there are also longer-term consequences of having a serious illness as a child or young person, which can affect many aspects of your life, well after recovery.

If you have gaps in your CV, like missing your GCSEs or having no work experience or few if any extra curricular activities it can put you at a real disadvantage if you want to go on to further or higher education. This in turn can affect your ability to find work, get a mortgage, insurance or be able to rent in the private sector.

And it isn't just the child who has the illness who is affected if they have to take prolonged time off school. There's the impact on siblings, whose own schooling, social life and mental wellbeing can be affected. For example, brothers and sisters can often feel guilty about going out with their friends, and so end up being isolated too.

Then there's the financial impact on families. If one or both parents has to give up work to ensure they are there to look after their child – especially if there are mental health problems, and 24 hour care is needed – the financial impact can be huge.

I would also argue that society as a whole is affected. Because if children and young people aren't given the support they need to fulfil their potential at school, or go on to further or higher education, or get the jobs and careers they want – then we all lose out on their talents and contributions.

So this issue really matters.

Which – of course – is why you are all here today!

Where do we go next?

I know there is huge expertise in this room and that you are determined to continue improving the services you offer, and spread the excellent examples of provision in some parts of the country to all parts of the country.

Of course, your already challenging job is made even harder when Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and support for Special Education Needs are under such strain and when preventive support for children and families has all but disappeared in many areas. I believe this can, and must change.

The most important challenge we all face is to put the issue of children who miss out on school because of physical or mental illness much higher up the national political and policy agenda, because although there has been some progress over the last 2 decades – I'm thinking particularly about the 2013 update to the statutory guidance – there is still, far too little political recognition or drive around this vital issue.

I can't remember a minister focusing on this issue, or a Select Committee conducting an Inquiry into it during the 9 years I've been an MP. If you compare this to the amount of attention and focus that is rightly put on children who are excluded from school due to behavioural issues – which affects roughly the same number of children and young people a year – the contrast is stark.

I hope we can work together to change this and raise the profile of what you do and why it is so important for individuals, families and society as a whole.

So let's identify individual parliamentary champions in all the different parties; let's secure support and interest from all the relevant Select Committees and All Party Parliamentary Groups and let's lobby Ministers to come up with a concrete plan of action.

Given the global trend which has seen the number of children with serious long term and chronic illnesses increase as survival rates improve, this issue is only going to become more important in future – not less.

I hope I will be able to play my part in securing the changes we need, and look forward to learning from you and working with you in the months and years ahead.